



Ten Common Interviewing Mistakes

How effective is the typical interview in predicting future performance? A number of studies (see Table 1, next page) on the predictive power of different selection procedures have shown that the traditional interview – you know, the one where you walk into the interview with a blank page, ask some of your favourite questions (“Tell me about yourself?” “Are you a team player?”) – is only marginally better than random selection (tossing a coin) in predicting future performance.

So why is the traditional interview so ineffective as a predictor of future performance? Here are some of the most common reasons for this disconcerting fact.

1. Making up your mind within minutes of meeting the candidate:

Research has shown that interviewers make up their minds in less than four minutes of shaking a candidate’s hand. They spend the rest of the interview interpreting what the candidate says in a way that is congruent with their first impression.

For example, they are more likely to brush off the blemishes of a favoured candidate’s history as just a bit of bad luck, while viewing sceptically the accomplishments of a less favoured candidate. To interview more effectively, managers must recognise their personal biases and objectively measure candidates on their past behaviour.

2. The Halo Effect:

Letting one factor (e.g., top college graduate or worked for your top competitor) influence everything else. Not everyone who has graduated from our best colleges, or with top marks, has excelled in the business world and your top competitor has probably hired their fair share of duds. Where they worked or went to college is never as important as what they did when they were there.

3. Asking predictable, opinion-based questions:

Questions like “What are your strengths and weaknesses” “Where do you hope to be in five years?” provide very little insight into what really motivates individuals. What you find out instead is how well the person has prepared for the question and has crafted a response that you want to hear. If you insist on asking these questions, try following up by asking for concrete examples that would indicate how their strengths and weaknesses have worked for or against them in the past. Or try asking what they have done in the last five years that would indicate that their five-year plan is a realistic one – you may get a few dropped jaws.

4. Not probing vigorously:

Managers often accept unsupported or vague claims instead of probing for details. For example, a candidate says “I doubled my territory’s sales within the first year.” Does this mean sales went from one million to two million or twenty thousand to forty thousand? Get all the facts. Find out exactly what they did to attain their achievements, and, most importantly, ask for the name of the person they were reporting to during that time. You’ll find your candidate’s success stories will suddenly start sounding more realistic.

5. Being unprepared:

By not reading the candidate’s résumé until they are in the reception area, or worse, in your office, you are sending a negative message: “I don’t care about you. This is not a people-oriented company. I’m not going to be paying too much attention to your responses to my questions.”

The candidate returns the favour by providing vague responses and mentally registering your company as a place to work only if nothing better comes along. By not reviewing the résumé you are missing a great opportunity to impress your candidates with your knowledge of their past, build rapport, get candid responses to your questions and probe their work history.

6. Placing an over-emphasis on the can-do:

(Things like education, industry experience and technical credentials) instead of the **will-do** (things like attitudes, motivations and temperament). Will-do factors have been shown time and time again to be the factors that lead to success or failure in a job, yet managers rely on a combination of can do factors and gut feeling to make decisions.

Remember, what they did is never as important as how they did it. Your ability to assess will-do factors can be greatly enhanced by using Psychometric Assessments. You’ll note from Table 1 that “personality tests” are two-to-three times more effective than the traditional interview, providing the traits measured are those deemed critical for successful performance is used.

Think of what makes your successful people the success that they are, or why your failures fail and you will get some idea of what you should be looking for in an interview.

7. Asking Leading Questions:

For example, “ABC Menswear runs their stores like boot camps. How did you like working for them?” If you keep your own opinions out of the question, you’d get more objective, meaningful responses from candidates.

8. Not carefully determining the job requirements:

We often make assumptions about job requirements and hire based on those assumptions, only to find out that the assumptions work against successfully filling the position.

For example, companies may limit their candidate pool by specifying a college diploma or greater for a position, when what they really need is someone with good problem solving skills.

Worse still, many employers recruit without a current job description for the position.

9. Over-selling the position:

When we see a candidate who really excites us, we tend to present the job in a way that they will find appealing.

For example, if we're interviewing an energetic, assertive person for an administrative assistant position, we may emphasise (even embellish) the autonomy and opportunities for advancement that the position provides, when what the job really requires is someone to type memos all day long. What you end up with is an employee who, in addition to being deeply dissatisfied with the job, feels they have been lied to. They won't last long.

10. Hiring the best of a bad lot:

Searching for the right candidate can be a long and arduous process. Sometimes when we reach the end of that process we find that no one on the short list meets our criteria, although some may be close.

When faced with the prospect of starting from square one, managers often elect to make sacrifices and hire the best of a bad lot, a process that costs them dearly in the long run.

The cost of having to de-hire and re-hire is always greater than the cost of delaying a staffing decision. Starting over will save you money in the long run. It will also have a more positive impact on the rest of your staff by letting them know that you take your people seriously.

Tom was interviewing candidates for a top sales position. He liked the squeaky-clean, fresh-out-of-college look of the first applicant, Andy. When Andy mentioned that he played hurling, Tom assumed this meant that he was a team player who had the competitive desire he needed to win in sales.

The second applicant, Bill, had a tattoo – a sure sign of a bad attitude as far as Tom was concerned. When Bill said he played hurling, Tom figured this meant he was a hooligan, who'd probably come in late often, because he'd be out drinking with his buddies after his evening matches.

By avoiding such mistakes, we can be more objective in the interviewing process, but we can never eliminate our biases completely. The good news is that, by combining a simple personality assessment system with structured behavioural interviewing, companies can greatly improve their ability to predict candidates' job performance.

Selection procedures have been researched in terms of their ability to predict successful job performance. The correlations of various methods are outlined below, where 1.0 is perfect prediction and 0.0 is random prediction.

In summary, the interview process is one that is chock-full of subjectivity and personal bias. Companies have to work to reduce bias by developing a more systematic process that focuses on will-do factors. Making good hiring decisions has little to do with being a good judge of character. Anyone can do it with the right tools.

TABLE 1 : Predictive Power of Selection Procedures		
Graphology (handwriting analysis)	0.0	<p><i>“By combining two or more methods, the ability to predict future performance increases substantially.”</i></p> <p>Source: Hunter & Hunter, 1984, Schmitt, 1984, Thacker & Cattaneo, 1987, Smith, 1988</p>
Typical Employment Interview	0.15	
Years Experience/Education	0.19	
Reference Checks	0.22	
Personality Tests	0.39	
Structured Behavioural Interview	0.40	
Ability Tests	0.52	

Few organisations know the true cost of their recruitment and selection activity. Our two cost calculators in our Tips section of the site may help you to understand the make-up of those costs. Training staff in selection interviewing and upgrading your practices, procedures to best practice will typically yield a 50% reduction in your costs in this area. A major factor not accounted for here is the negative impact on the rest of your employees of high staff turnover.

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Organisations do not succeed – only people can. Organisations that select the right people and develop them to their potential can achieve truly awesome results.

Call us for information on our “Excellence in Interviewing Skills” Workshops and other selection advice.

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“I'd have to say that my best business decisions have had to do with picking people.” - Bill Gates